

NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART

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CELEBRATED MAZARIN TAPESTRY RETURNS TO VIEW AT NATIONAL GALLERY

WASHINGTON, D.C. The Mazarin tapestry, an early Renaissance Flemish work widely considered one of the finest extant tapestries, goes on view in Gallery G-1 at the National Gallery of Art today following restoration work.

The tapestry, woven around 1500 in Brussels, is approximately eleven feet high and fourteen feet wide, and represents The Triumph of Christ. It was acquired by the Gallery in the Joseph E. Widener gift, 1942.

The first recorded reference to the tapestry, some 150 years after it was woven, occurs in an inventory of the art collection of Cardinal Mazarin (1602-1661). Mazarin, prime minister of France at the time of Louis XIII and Anne of Austria, was virtual ruler of France from 1643-1661. At his death in 1661 the tapestry passed with part of his art collection to the husband of his niece, the Duchesse de Mazarin. When she and her husband died, it went to Russia briefly. Eventually it was brought back to France by a nobleman for his castle near Marseille. Sold to an art dealer in

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London after many changes of hands, it was bought in 1910 by J. P. Morgan, sold in 1916 to Joseph E. Widener, and presented to the National Gallery.

The tapestry was removed from view for cleaning and minor repairs in 1966. The restoration work was begun by the late Louisa Bellinger. In May of 1969 Joseph Columbus, a consultant on textiles to the National Gallery, took up the work and brought it to its present state.

The Mazarin, woven of wool, silk, gold and silver, is famous as one of the finest textured fabrics of its kind anywhere, with as many as 21-22 warps to the inch, giving great subtlety of coloring and shading. The prevailing colors are golden brown, blues, greens and salmon pink. Most of the yarns used in the reweaving had to be specially dyed to the colors of small samples that were still obtainable on the back of the tapestry.

While the definite identity of the commissioner of the tapestry remains unknown, the large dimensions and lavish use of gold and silver suggest a royal patron.

The tapestry's designer is also uncertain, but its high quality shows it to be a work from a master weaver's shop. The tapestry has been attributed on stylistic grounds to the studio of Jan van Roome, a Brussels designer active c. 1500.

The Mazarin tapestry has a triptych composition with a separate theme in each section. The panels are separated by a delicate, woven architectural framework of gold pillars encrusted with jewels.

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The large central panel represents Christ enthroned in heaven, surrounded by four angels, with a distant landscape under his feet. Below him worship the Pope, the Emperor and their courts.

The scene in the lower section of the left wing is the Tibur-tine Sibyl's revelation to the emperor Octavius Augustus of the coming birth of Christ. In the panel above, a workman begins digging to build an altar on the site of the emperor's vision. A Latin inscription reads "The Emperor Augustus adored the King of Kings when the Sibyl had shown him the apparition of the Savior."

The marriage of Queen Esther and King Ahasuerus is the subject of the lower right panel, and in the section above this the Queen chooses implements for a banquet. The inscription reads "When Esther had kissed the scepter of Ahasuerus she drank from the King's cup filled with unmixed wine."

The wedding scene in the tapestry may actually have a double significance, and there exist several theories on it. Miss Bellinger and George Leland Hunter (author of Tapestries: Their Origin, History and Renaissance, 1912, and The Practical Book of Tapestries, 1912), believed the Mazarin tapestry was commissioned by Joanna of Spain, daughter of Ferdinand and Isabella, in honor of her marriage to Philip the Handsome. Many stylistically similar tapestries in the Spanish royal collection in Madrid are known to have been ordered by Joanna. Philip, Regent of the Netherlands, often employed Flemish artists.

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The late James J. Rorimer, director of the Metropolitan Museum of Art and an eminent medievalist, in a study devoted to Jan van Roome and other Flemish tapestry makers, stated his belief that the faces of Esther and Ahasuerus were portraits of Anne of Brittany and Charles VIII of France on the occasion of their wedding in 1491. Renaissance custom often used portraits of actual people as religious figures in a painting or tapestry.

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